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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Ha'aretz and Yediot led with the security forces' preparedness ahead of the evacuation of settlements. While Ha'aretz focuses on the IDF, which the newspaper says is beginning to "mentally prepare" soldiers for the pullout, Yediot details possible scenarios raised by the police. Maariv reported that the IDF has started practicing for the demolition of settlers' houses. Israel Radio listed 10 Knesset members from "almost all parties," who have received threats on their lives, and reported that some of them have been granted protection.

Jerusalem Post's lead story: Under increasing local and foreign pressure, the pro-Syrian Lebanese government signaled Wednesday it may quit, while a group of Syrian intellectuals protested in downtown Damascus.

Israel Radio highlighted President Bush's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which is scheduled to take place today in Bratislava and focus on the prevention of nuclear terrorism.

Vice Premier Shimon Peres told Israel Radio this morning that PM Sharon provided him with "weighty arguments" why he should not be sent to the upcoming London summit on the bolstering of the PA. All media had reported that the two men disagreed on the matter. Peres said that the U.S. may have been among the international elements that recommended that Israel attend the meeting. Ha'aretz cited a version according to which Sharon told Peres that the U.S. administration believes that Israel does not have to take part in the summit. The media say that Sharon has strongly objected to Israel's presence at the summit for fear it would be transformed into an international peace conference that would try to coerce Israel into positions it does not accept.

Ha'aretz and other media reported that talks between Israel and the PA on the handing over of security responsibility for the West Bank cities to the PA have run aground, but that the territories remain quiet nevertheless. Israel Radio quoted FM Silvan Shalom as saying in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) that on Monday security forces thwarted a terrorist attack and captured both would-be perpetrators. Jerusalem Post reported that Sayyed Rasas, of the Maghazi refugee camp, who was accused of "collaboration" with Israel, was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor by a PA court in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday. Israel Radio quoted Egyptian FM Ahmed Abu el-Gheit as saying Wednesday that Egypt is prepared to position 750 troops along the Philadelphi route to prevent arms smuggling, but not before the IDF leaves the area.

Ha'aretz cited official estimates according to which some 300 of the 1,700 families living in the Katif Bloc and northern West Bank have been in touch with the Disengagement Administration or attorneys in order to examine the option of leaving their respective settlements voluntarily.

Jerusalem Post reported that the Council of Rabbis of Jewish Settlements in the Territories is distributing a religious opinion according to which the disengagement

move entails 14 "biblical sins." The opinion was authored by Rabbi Shaul Bar-Illan, head of the Kfar Darom kollel (yeshiva for married men) in the Gaza Strip. Leading media reported that Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who heads the nationalist Ateret Cohanim yeshiva, sparked a disagreement in the pro-settler movement when he told leading Internet site Ynet: "On evacuation day, people should get up and leave their homes without using force." All media reported that on Wednesday, Knesset members Effi Eitam and Rabbi Yitzhak Levy announced they were leaving the National Religious Party (NRP) and forming a new faction, "Religious Zionism," that would work in tandem with National Union. The NRP now includes only four MKs.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer was quoted as saying in an interview conducted with Ha'aretz on Wednesday that NATO would consider stationing peacekeeping troops here to facilitate the peace treaty only if an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty were signed, both sides requested a NATO presence, and the UN Security Council endorsed the request.

Leading media cited the State Prosecution as saying Wednesday that the ruling last year by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the separation fence between Israel and the Palestinians was based on erroneous and outdated information. The prosecution said that the court almost totally ignored the terror attacks that made it imperative to set up the fence, the considerations that led to planning its route, and the state's duty to protect its citizens.

Several media reported that on Wednesday, Fatah approved the composition of Ahmed Qurei's new government, and that the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) will vote on the matter today.

All media reported that MK Michael Eitan (Likud), the Chairman of the Knesset's Constitution, Justice and Law Committee, rejected a unanimous ruling reached Wednesday by the High Court of Justice, according to which the decision by the Knesset's House Committee not to lift the immunity of Likud MK Michael Gorlovsky is invalid because it is illegal. Gorlovsky has admitted to voting twice in the plenum on the economic emergency plan in May 2003. The media say that Sharon's son MK Omri Sharon could face a similar situation. Leading commentators also foresee a constitutional crisis.

Maariv reported that Jordan's King Abdullah II has invited the Israeli-Arab Knesset members for a get-to-know-you visit on Sunday.

Jerusalem Post and Israel Radio reported on the positive welcome Deputy Education Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior (Labor-Meimad) is receiving in Doha, Qatar. Melchior is in Qatar to tour educational institutions and participate in a public debate on the future of Middle East peace. He was invited to the emirate by Qatari Foundation head Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser Al-Misnad, who is the wife of the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamas Bin Khalifa al-Thani. Melchior's visit was organized by Tim Sebastian, the veteran host of the BBC-TV show Hard Talk.

Maariv reported that Tanzim activist Jihad Jaara, who was expelled to Ireland during Operation Defensive Shield, continued to direct terrorist operations from that country, through a Hizbullah agent, former Israeli Arab Kais Obeid. Maariv quoted Mohammed Bakri, the director of the controversial documentary "Jenin, Jenin," which describes the IDF's Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank city, as saying Wednesday that the editing of certain scenes in his film was flawed.

In an interview with talk-show and comedian Eli Yatzpan broadcast last night on cable TV's Channel 3, PM Sharon said that France favored the Arab states, and criticized its refusal to condemn Hizbullah as a terrorist organization.

Mideast:

Summary:

Columnist Avraham Tal wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "The question Sharon must ask himself is whether the time has not arrived to disengage from the 'rebels.' After U.S. President George W. Bush's speech in Brussels ... we can forget about interim arrangements."

Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "We must not make light of what the religious Zionist movement is now undergoing.... [Furthermore,] if disengagement is carried out, the question of [Israel's] identity and agenda will also be placed on the table of all the other sectors of society."

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in Yediot Aharonot: "The law preventing Palestinians from becoming Israeli citizens should be viewed as the framework for mutual bilateral agreements that are yet to be concluded. This would be the practical interpretation of Bush's 'two-state' vision."

Block Quotes:

I. "Disengage From the 'Rebels'"

Columnist Avraham Tal wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (February 24): "The question Sharon must ask himself is whether the time has not arrived to disengage from the 'rebels.' After U.S. President George W. Bush's speech in Brussels, the formaldehyde has evaporated, the 'cantons plan' has become obsolete, and we can forget about interim arrangements. After the disengagement, the road map will be put on the negotiation table along with the continuation of the evacuation of Judea and Samaria [i.e. the West Bank], negotiations that Sharon cannot successfully conduct with the millstone of the Likud Central Committee and the 'rebels' around his neck. Would it not be better to spring forward with the unavoidable surgery in the Likud, and seriously consider the Shinui offer to set up a rescue government -- Likud (with its right wing in the opposition), Labor and Shinui, while ignoring the paralyzing center? The support of Yahad would facilitate the implementation of the government's tasks in the diplomatic arena and the functioning of the government until the end of its term in November 2006. Disengage from them now, Sharon."

II. "Towards the Crisis"

Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (February 24): "We must not make light of what the religious Zionist movement is now undergoing. As the days pass, the mechanisms take their course, and the day of the implementation of the disengagement plan approaches -- and fewer and fewer people remain in this camp who believe that a miracle will indeed happen to them, and the plan will not be carried out.... Now this camp is facing with full force the recognition that it is a minority and can no longer dictate the agenda. This is a great crisis, which brings many important figures within it to speak of the danger of conceptual disengagement from the State of Israel, to say that those who are no longer considered an elite will have difficulty continuing to serve. These statements are an expression of pain and harsh disillusionment, which must not be treated callously. But the discussion, ultimately, will not remain within the religious Zionist movement alone. If disengagement is carried out, the question of the identity and agenda will also be placed on the table of all the other sectors of society. After the big bang of the withdrawal and uprooting thousands from their homes -- without a signed agreement, without the 'end of the conflict' even on paper -- we will all have to give ourselves an answer to the question of what we are doing here. The answer will have to be a better one than 'fighting the Arabs and hoping that tomorrow peace will come.'"

III. "Two Citizenships for Two Nations"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in Yediot Aharonot (February 24): "Both Israel's High Court of Justice and its new Interior Minister Ophir Pines feel embarrassed and powerless when dealing with the July 2003 amendment to the Citizenship Law stipulating that Palestinians cannot become Israeli citizens, thus curbing a painful demographic flood caused by the marriage of Palestinians to Israeli citizens.... This is no longer true.... It would be logical for [the future Palestinian] state to aspire not to have Jewish citizens; then again, religious or ultra-Orthodox Jews would prefer to stay near the tombs of the patriarchs, to receive Palestinian citizenship, and create some sort of threat on the Palestinian state by their very reproduction. Should this happen, the Palestinian state would be interested in foiling this phenomenon. Therefore, there would be a point to signing a

legislation deal with that state -- through two parallel laws on both sides -- that would prevent the citizens of one single country from becoming citizens of the neighboring state. In other words, the law preventing Palestinians from becoming Israeli citizens should be viewed as the framework for mutual bilateral agreements that are yet to be concluded. This would be the practical interpretation of Bush's 'two-state' vision. Any contrary solution could give birth in the future to a new, evidently unwelcome, demographic and security explosion.... Those would be mirror laws meeting the interests of both sides -- they would therefore also be welcomed by the world."

KURTZER